

Fiscal Year 2015

Superintendent's Budget Message

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Introduction

Our town is at a crossroads. As a community, we must decide whether we will commit to providing our children with an education that is comparable to what existed just a few years ago, or whether we will continue to dismantle what has been one of the most cost effective school districts in the nation¹ and jeopardize our children's chances of success in the future.

An uncomfortable situation

This budget recommendation makes the case for a significant restoration of resources to the School Department. The bottom line is that funding this budget recommendation would require an increase of \$7.8 million, or 14.99%, in the School Department's appropriated budget. Clearly, this represents a very large increase in the level of financial support the district would receive; it also illustrates how deep of a hole the district is in due to the fiscal challenges that have resulted in our current level of resources.

It is uncomfortable to recommend such a significant increase in the School Department's appropriated budget, for several reasons. It is uncomfortable because it is clear that other town departments are also in need of additional resources, and the town's financial resources are limited. It is uncomfortable because supporting an increase of this magnitude would require a larger financial contribution by the town's citizens, and some of our neighbors will have difficulty affording this. It is uncomfortable because there will be some who will claim, contrary to evidence, that our schools already spend too much, and who will express outrage and indignation while insinuating that the schools' needs aren't real, that our motivation is actually something other than doing the right thing for our community's children, and that the School Department's leaders are incompetent, untrustworthy, or both.

However, it is *more* uncomfortable to impoverish the education of our town's children when they live in a community that has the means to provide adequate resources to its schools.²

¹ A 2011 report by the Center for American Progress ranked Shrewsbury in the top 2.8% out of over 9,000 districts nationally for "return on investment," based on 2007-08 educational outcomes and spending: <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education/report/2011/01/19/8902/return-on-educational-investment/>

² The most recent MA Department of Revenue statistics show that Shrewsbury is in the top 21% communities in the state for income per capita and in the top 48% for equalized value of property per capita. See https://dls.gateway.dor.state.ma.us/DLSReports/DLSReportViewer.aspx?ReportName=Comparative_Report&ReportTitle=Community%20Comparison%20Report

It is *more* uncomfortable to know that we are not providing funding for staffing levels and educational opportunities that are standard for communities that are similar to, or less affluent, than ours.

It is *more* uncomfortable to know that Shrewsbury students' performance has deteriorated, with achievement gaps widening and academic growth weakening.

It is *more* uncomfortable to know that students who are at-risk and experiencing academic, social, behavioral, or mental health difficulties are not able to get adequate support, wasting their potential and creating real social and economic costs for our society that are ultimately more expensive than investing in these students' education.

It is *more* uncomfortable to think about the shy girl who is experiencing reading difficulties in her class of 31 second graders at Floral Street School, who is not getting enough of the teacher's attention or frequent enough individualized instruction, and who research says will have a much less likely chance of future educational success if she's not reading at grade level by the end of third grade.

It is *more* uncomfortable to think about the emotionally fragile boy whose needs cannot be satisfied by his teachers in his 7th grade classes of 31 or by the grade-level counselor responsible for 490 students, and who begins acting out more - and in more serious ways - in order to gain others' attention, compromising both his learning and the learning of his peers.

It is *more* uncomfortable to think about the high achieving high school student who is eager to challenge herself in math and science, but who cannot take the additional courses she wants due to the lack of teachers, and who does not gain admission to an engineering college and ultimately decides not to pursue this career despite our country's great need for more strong students to enter the so-called STEM fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

It is *more* uncomfortable to realize that our students will not perform to their potential on high-stakes state assessments when the district's mathematics curriculum and textbooks are out of alignment, and all mathematics curriculum support for educators in preschool through grade 8 was eliminated in recent years.

It is *more* uncomfortable to think about how many times teachers don't bother to utilize the technology in their classrooms or computer labs because it is so out of date that it will not function properly, resulting in missed learning opportunities for their students.

It is *more* uncomfortable to think about losing an outstanding teacher, who in recent years has had significantly larger class sizes and less administrative support and training, who is expected to implement a variety of new mandates, and who then decides to seek employment in a district where there is a more reasonable level of support, thus depriving Shrewsbury's children of her talent and wasting the district's considerable investment it has made in her development as an education professional.

It is *more* uncomfortable to think about losing a highly successful principal whose job is exponentially more complex than it was just a few years ago, whose workload has increased substantially due to many new mandates combined with cuts in curriculum leadership positions, and who could leave Shrewsbury for another district where the compensation is higher and there is much more support for the work of school leaders, thus sending that school community into an uncertain leadership transition at an inopportune time.

For all of these reasons, the time has come for our town to meet its responsibility to the welfare of our children by providing adequate funding for their education. Doing so would require a much larger investment than is currently being made, but would still result in a cost-effective level of educational spending millions of dollars below that of the average Massachusetts school district.³

The Problem

Our schools have struggled with resource limitations for the past decade, with reductions in personnel and programming occurring in Fiscal Year 2004. Since then, our district has coped with growth of about 300 students (to an all time high of 6,014 this year) and significant mandated cost increases, mainly related to special education, while the overall town's budget has had to weather large increases in the cost of health insurance while also addressing future town retirement system and post-employment benefit costs. During this time, net state "local aid" funding decreased due to economic conditions and the diversion of millions of dollars of charges for charter school tuition as more families opted out of our system (a trend that has been reversed in recent years). At the same time, state aid for education through the Chapter 70 program has leveled off as enrollment growth flattened and due to the fact that the state formula calls for Shrewsbury to contribute a larger percentage of its school budget from local funding due to its levels of personal income and property wealth relative to the rest of the state. Of course, the recent recession and slow economic recovery exacerbated this situation.

As a result of these conditions, the district has had to cut additional personnel and programming and forego investments in much needed resources. In fact, the most recent state calculation shows that our district is in the bottom 11% in overall per pupil spending in the state, and in the bottom 2% for spending in the category of instructional materials, equipment, and technology.⁴ By Fiscal Year 2013, the district could no longer avoid cutting classroom teachers across the entire system, resulting in a class size crisis that has now continued into a second school year. Classes well above School Committee guidelines are the norm across the district, with multiple overcrowded elementary classes (including second grade classes hitting a high of 31 students), all middle level grades *averaging* 29 to 30 students, and a very large proportion of high school classes hitting this level as well.⁵ These

³ For Fiscal Year 2012, Shrewsbury spent \$2,318 less per student than the state average; this figure multiplied by the FY12 population of 5,947 students shows that Shrewsbury would have had to spend \$13.8 million more on education just to reach the state average.

⁴ See <http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/statistics/ppx12.html>

⁵ See http://schools.shrewsbury-ma.gov/egov/docs/1383239494_939453.pdf

class sizes are having a significant negative effect on the quality of education being provided to our students by compromising the quantity and quality of teacher attention, instruction, and feedback, creating physically crowded classrooms that compromise the learning environment, and increasing educators' core workloads so that there is less time for involvement in other educational initiatives.

This past fall, I reported on the state of our school district.⁶ I informed the community that:

- We have insufficient resources to meet student needs
- We are innovating and collaborating to try and cope with increased demands
- We are concerned that the quality of the education provided to Shrewsbury students is deteriorating

I also reported that we have begun to experience significant negative changes to measures of educational success. Based on our state test scores, our district's accountability status was downgraded from Level 1, the highest rating, to Level 2, which is troubling as it means that the achievement gap is widening for at-risk students.⁷ Further, student academic growth scores weakened considerably across the board and accelerated over the past year.⁸

During the past few years, I have communicated that the many successes our district has achieved over time are not sustainable given the resources available. I have warned that a continued lack of resources will inevitably result in lower quality education for our children, and that slippage has already begun to occur. The bottom line is that we are experiencing short-term harm that has created a risk of long-term damage to the quality of public education in Shrewsbury.

The Solution

The School Committee has charged the School Department administration with creating a Fiscal Year 2015 budget proposal that addresses key priorities and meets the fiscal guidelines the School Committee established in October 2013.⁹

While these priorities and guidelines will address many areas where the district currently lacks adequate resources, it is important to note that a budget that meets these parameters will not return the school district to the level of resources and support it had prior to the reductions that began occurring a decade ago. The following personnel and programming that were cut over the past decade are not recommended for funding:

⁶ State of the District Report - Part I: http://schools.shrewsbury-ma.gov/egov/docs/1380744342_707519.pdf

⁶ State of the District Report - Part II: http://schools.shrewsbury-ma.gov/egov/docs/1380197719_789215.pdf

⁷ See state accountability profile here:

<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/accountability/report/district.aspx?linkid=30&orgcode=02710000&orgtypecode=5&>

⁸ See state student growth reports here:

<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/mcas/growth.aspx?linkid=47&orgcode=02710000&fycode=2013&orgtypecode=5&>

⁹ See http://schools.shrewsbury-ma.gov/egov/docs/1381437974_677825.pdf

Previous Personnel/Programming **Not** Recommended for Funding in FY15

- Foreign language classes in grades 3, 4, & 5
- High school automotive technology elective program
- Reading specialist teachers in every elementary school
- Library/media specialists in every elementary school
- Technology integration specialists
- Oak Middle School video technology classes
- Sherwood Middle School drama classes
- SHS vocational preparation program
- Free, in-school music lessons
- Late buses to transport middle and high school students home from after school activities
- Secretaries at SHS, Oak, Sherwood, and Central Office

The recommended budget includes the following in order to meet the School Committee's priorities and guidelines:

- Sufficient teaching staff to reduce class size ratios either within or close to School Committee guidelines.
- Curriculum materials to address pent up demand and the requirement to align with new state curriculum, especially in mathematics, and the restoration of some curriculum support personnel to provide necessary capacity for this crucial district function.
- Personnel and resources to provide more in-district special education teaching and administrative capacity in order to meet mandates and to address the increase in student mental and behavioral health issues by providing in-district supports for students to avoid more costly out-of-district placements.
- Investments in technology to replace extremely outdated equipment, to update infrastructure, and to provide the equipment necessary to meet the district's strategic goals for improving learning through the use of technology.
- Increases in day-to-day operational costs, including contractually obligated compensation adjustments, tuition increases for students in out-of-district placements, increased costs associated with transportation (including homeless student transportation), additional furniture as a larger population enters Oak Middle School, pent up demand for basic supplies, a required phone system upgrade, and other needs associated with increases in the "cost of doing business."

Conclusion

This budget recommendation lays out the case for increasing the resources provided to successfully educate Shrewsbury's children. The documents that follow provide a detailed rationale for these recommended expenditures. Over the coming months, supplementary information will be provided regarding different areas of this budget and presented at School Committee meetings in order to help the community gain the best possible understanding of our schools' needs.

As a resident and a parent, I believe that Shrewsbury is a wonderful community in which to live and to raise a family. As your superintendent, it is my duty to sound the alarm by sharing my serious concerns that our schools are presently not meeting the needs of our students -- and to illustrate what is required to solve this difficult problem. I am optimistic that the Shrewsbury community will ultimately find a way to provide today's children with the same high quality of education that recent graduates received, and thus remain true to the deeply-held American value of providing the next generation with the opportunity to build a successful future.